

## THE LAST *GUERRE-DE-COURSE* OF THE SALÉ ROVERS

On 1 August 1828, little did *raïs* Brittel of Salé and *raïs* Bargach of Rabat, each at the helm of a ship, realize they were writing the final chapter in the biography of the Salé Rovers.

The Second Barbary War ended in June 1815 with the triumph of the U.S. Navy over Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. In August of the following year the British Royal Navy destroyed the fortifications and ships of Algiers in a 9-hour bombardment. It was these two acts that stirred the Sultan of Morocco, Mulay Suleiman, to order a stop to all corsair activities in 1818. A decade later this order was reversed by his successor Mulay Abd er-Rahman and in July 1828 Brittel and Bargach embarked on what would be the final exhibition of the daring that had struck fear in the heart of every sailor for over two centuries.

Sailing the Atlantic during the first week of August, the Rovers found themselves between Porto, Portugal and Cape Finisterre, Spain where Brittel and Bargach encountered three merchant ships – a British brig, a British schooner, and an Austrian brig – and seized them. Why? The British because they were not flying any identifying flags; the Austrian because of unpaid debts owed by the former Republic of Venice which, since 1815, was Austrian territory. The prizes were sailed back to the Bou-Regreg whereupon the Sultan ordered them to Tangiers where they arrived on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August.

Both countries immediately acted but, as Austria had no consul in Morocco, the English Consul to Morocco made the first move. The Consul not only rejected the claims of the captains but charged them with flying a false flag – the white flag of the King of France – supported by declarations made under oath by the captain of the brig and the principal members of his crew. Brittel formally denies this accusation and proceedings opened on the 29<sup>th</sup> in the kasbah of Tangiers. The following day both English ships but the Consul is not satisfied. England demands the Sultan issue a formal proclamation that forbids the use of the ‘stop and visit’ under any pretext whatsoever for all English vessels. The ‘stop and visit’ is allowed under international law to any nation when two ships meet on the open seas. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, two British warships drop anchor in Tangier harbor to demonstrate the English will and an ultimatum is given to the Sultan: English demands will be met within forty days or diplomatic relations will be severed and the port of Tangiers would be shut down by the Royal Navy which is what came to pass on November 12<sup>th</sup>. In response, the English delegation is held against their will when they try to leave the city without the Sultan’s approval on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Negotiations follow with sacrifices made on both sides – all the English can leave except the Consul; England will not receive any compensation because there was no physical damage to the ships or cargo; and the ‘stop and visit’ is suspended for English ships – but neither side is satisfied with then agreement signed on 29 January 1829.

Habsburg Austria reacted quite differently and the consequences were much greater. *Le Véloce* was a brig owned by Sieur Monerde whose homeport was Trieste, then a part of Austria too. *Le Véloce* was sailing to Rio de Janeiro with a cargo of oil, wine, and 674 cases of general merchandise, including Venetian glassware, candles, pharmaceuticals, and batteries, when they were intercepted. The crew was immediately removed from their ship and they are sent to Fez, all the time being treated with respect. The consular corps at Tangiers immediately acts and, through the Danish consul, acting on behalf of Austria, asks for the sailors to be released into their custody. The Sultan acquiesces and the prisoners arrive in Tangier on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October where their expenses are shared by all the consuls which earn the corps public acknowledgment of this act of humanity from the Austrian *chargé d'affaires* at Madrid.

The tortuous negotiations are to be, hopefully, nudged forward when 4 Austrian warships make their appearance off the coast on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March in 1829. The Austrian legate demanded a salute to their flag, the immediate release of the crew and *Le Véloce* with the entire cargo intact or paid for in full. The Sultan has 48 hours to respond. Not surprisingly, he does not respond and the legate leaves only to return on the 21<sup>st</sup> with two more ships.

The consular corps steps in and receives the legate at the marina and, with their marines surrounding them, proceeds to the Danish consulate. That same day a conference is held with the Austrian legate being assisted by the Danish Consul, the governor of Tangier, the sultan's delegate, and the customs official. Headway is made and the captain and the sailors of *Le Véloce* are immediately released, bringing to an end their 7 month adventure in Morocco. Taking no chances, they are immediately embarked on the Austrian ships. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the legate and captain pay an official visit to each of the consuls of the city. This is when the demands of the Austrian government are heard: release of *Le Véloce* plus any costs to return her to the same condition she was in when captured, the full cargo returned, and cost of sending the Austrian Navy and the legate to be paid by the Sultan in full.

The demands were impossible to meet, literally. Two Jewish traders from Tétouan arrived in Rabat just days earlier with the Sultan's order to throw any wine on the ship overboard; it also ordered half of the cargo was to be transferred to the Sultan while the other half was remanded to the custody of the customs officials. It is doubtful the Sultan would have submitted to the demands even had it been possible to meet them.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, with the Moroccans stubbornly refusing to release the ship or its cargo, the Austrian Imperial Navy returned to Tangier. Negotiations are broken off on April 22 and Austria announces that not only will all Moroccan ports be blockaded, but hostilities will commence. Larache is bombarded on June 4<sup>th</sup>; Asilah on July 21<sup>st</sup>; and Tétouan on August 31<sup>st</sup> and again on September 25<sup>th</sup>. But all does not go well for Austria – a landing is made in Larache but it ends with a hundred Austrian heads being sent to Fez where they are mounted on the gates of the city.

An agreement is finally concluded at the end of February 1830. *Le Véloce* is released as-is without any cargo; Vienna gives up all other demands; and Morocco abandons any claims they held against the Republic of Venice. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 7 in 1830, a small Austrian warship with just 21 sailors arrives at the estuary of Bou Regreg. The sailors immediately commence the repairs needed to make *Le Véloce* seaworthy after 10 months of being abandoned. In Gibraltar, on March 19<sup>th</sup>, a treaty is concluded between the two countries. Finally, at 4 pm on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, 1830, *Le Véloce* sailed from Rabat bound for Gibraltar.

In the midst of these negotiations, the Sultan decided to strengthen his navy by ordering 5 new ships to be built. But this not the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the Republic of Bou-Regreg was but a dim memory. Just six weeks after *Le Véloce* sailed away, French forces landed in Algiers; six weeks later, that city began 130+ years of occupation. The last of the Sultan's ships was launched at Rabat in 1832; three years later would find all 5 rotting at Larache. The Franco-Moroccan War of 1844 saw a loss of territory and prestige to French-Algeria and Salé was bombarded in 1851 after citizens had stolen cargo that had been rescued from a capsized French merchant vessel. Morocco itself would fall to France and Spain in less than 80 years.

Jacques Caillé, "Le derniers exploit des corsaires du Bou-Regreg," *Hespéris - Archives Berbères et Bulletin de l'Institut des hautes Études Marocaines*, Tome XXXVII, 4<sup>e</sup> Trimestres, 1950, pp. 429 – 437.